

The Way of Approaching Japan

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As the head organizer of this symposium, I would like to welcome all of you and thank you for coming from all over the world. My special appreciation goes to Prof. Eisenstadt who agreed to the plan of this meeting and cooperated with us from the building of its framework to the selection of participants.

The purpose of this symposium was to gather scholars from various disciplines and to discuss the points raised by Prof. Eisenstadt in his voluminous work, *Japanese Civilization, A Comparative View* (1995). To what extent are theories in social science and humanities — constructed in the West — able to reveal the characteristics of Japanese society? This inquiry is a precursor to the aim of this symposium. This corresponds to Prof. Eisenstadt's assertion that "the uniqueness of Japanese society" needs to be "analyzed in basically the same way as uniqueness of any other society."

This symposium began yesterday with the keynote speech on "Axial Civilization and non-Axial Civilizations". Since we did not have time for discussion yesterday, the first half of this session is devoted to discussion on the keynote speech. We thought that Prof. Shuntaro Ito, the president of the Japan Society for Comparative Study of Civilizations and a former professor of this center, would best suit the role of a discussant. Unfortunately, he was not available and I had to come in. I cannot replace him but will try my best to fulfill this role as a discussant.

The area of my work is social stratification and social mobility in nineteenth century Japan from the perspective of comparative historical sociology. Prof. Eisenstadt quoted my articles three times in his book. All of them relate to the Japanese meritocracy and confined to the period from the end of the Tokugawa regime (*bakumatsu*) to Meiji. Thus, I am very hesitant to comment on the central issue for today, which is the differences between Axial and non-Axial Civilizations, because the scope is too large. What I would like to do, instead, is to raise some questions for Prof. Eisenstadt to answer.

I would first like to start with the basic characteristics of Axial civilizations. I quote his definition:

"By Axial civilizations (to use Karl Jaspers' nomenclature) I refer to those civilization that crystallized during the period from 500B.C. to the first century

of the Christian era, or even to the rise of Islam, within which new types of ontological visions, conceptions of a basic tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders, emerged and institutionalized.” (p.13)

This is understandable if this refers only to the civilizations based on monotheism such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but not others. Was there a “tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders, emerged and institutionalized” in the Chinese civilization? Or in Hindu societies?

I agree with him in his postulate that Japan is a non-Axial civilization. There is “no basic tension” between the “transcendental world” and “mundane world” in Japan. This may be due to the lack of linguistic development of the term, “transcendental world.” I believe that there was no way to develop any tension, as the two worlds are not clearly demarcated to begin with.

The central question, however, is not to ask where to place Japanese civilization. Rather, the question here concerns the possibility of the existence of a civilization which does not have any tension between transcendental and mundane orders despite its development of the transcendental world. There are several among numerous civilizations in history which can be categorized as neither Axial or non-Axial civilizations. They might have been ignored, because as I believe the concept of Axial civilization itself is based too heavily on the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

I do think, however, that the concept of non-Axial civilization is successful as an analytical tool for analyzing the historical experience of Japan. However, this is also the very problem, that Japanese civilization is viewed excessively unique. He states, “The distinctiveness of Japan lies in its being the only non-Axial civilization that maintained — throughout its history, up to the modern time — a history of its own, without becoming in some way marginalized by the Axial civilizations, China and Korea, Confucianism and Buddhism, with which it was in continuous contact.” (p.14)

This claim is truly powerful. The non-Axial civilizations found in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mongolia, have long disappeared. Japan therefore is “the only remaining non-Axial civilization that maintained — a history of its own.”

However, I have to confess my ambivalent feelings towards this typology of civilizations. The prime question is; with what type of theoretical framework can we explain the uniqueness of Japan. For a long time, I have considered that the uniqueness of Japan has to be explained together with its similarity to other societies. To what extent, is the perspective of “civilization” effective in revealing Japanese society? Does the concept of civilization refer to a cohesive system without any contradiction? Or is it an unstable system in which competing and contradictory principles co-exists? Theoretically both systems are possible. Can

civilization maintain itself when an individual revolution or even a democratic revolution occurs? A rupture, in Prof. Eisenstadt's framework, can only take the form of the absorption or unification of non-Axial into Axial civilization. Would a rupture also take place between Axial civilizations? This is often referred to as a "collision of civilizations." I wonder how Prof. Eisenstadt, born in Israel, the place I only know indirectly, feels about this historical reality.

Japan is unique, or rather, isolated in its relationship with other civilizations. As the only non-Axial civilization, it does not have any fully formalized, abstract rule to impress upon other worlds. However, it is extremely flexible. There are no contradictions or collisions of principles in Japan because it holds the principle of no principles. Continual "adaptation" was possible because of its flexibility. This adaptation is the process of reproduction of principles in Japanese civilization.

Prof. Eisenstadt claims that "it is indeed the continual construction and reconstruction of generalized particularistic trust that constitutes the crux of the specified dynamics that developed in Japanese society." (Lecture note, p.20)

Yet, I ask again, is this phenomenon of Japanese civilization we get from the investigation of historical experience really unique to Japan? The answer depends on how we perceive Axial Civilizations, which I believe is a particular European concept. As I mentioned earlier, I believe that it is not necessary to extend and adopt the concept of Axial civilization to India and China.

If Axial civilizations should bear characteristics of a "new type of ontological vision," and "a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders," it should be confined to Judaistic, Christian, and Islamic civilizations. Then, the concept would be much clearer. An Axial civilization is an integrated system without inner contradiction. Moreover, its basic characteristics have continued to exist until now. It can also be said that it has an inability to accept and absorb other civilizations or relatively little experience in accepting other civilizations.

I repeat my point here. The analysis in terms of Axial and non-Axial civilization is successful in revealing the uniqueness of Japanese civilization. It is, in fact, too successful in revealing its uniqueness. That, I find, is the problem. There must be other countries which have gone through similar historical experiences. For example, Java which became Hindu and Islamic, Thailand which became Buddhist, and Vietnam which became Confucian. They all seem to share similar characteristics of non-Axial civilizations. How should we conceive Turkey, which became a secular nation by separating politics and religion and yet remains in the Islamic sphere? If there was a "Japanization" of world religions, it is not hard to imagine the "Javanization" of Islam.

A unified system without any internal contradiction does not necessarily have to be a prerequisite for a civilization. A civilization is a complex in which various historical experiences are compiled one after another. It bears repelling values inside. A basic tension lies not only between the supreme world and mundane world, but also among the values regarding the supreme world.

I suppose that there are other civilizations, which also continue to maintain the nature of a non-Axial civilization by demonstrating flexibility much like Japan. Such a civilization might once have been called non-Axial but is now absorbed into an Axial civilization. I maintain that Japan is not necessarily the only non-Axial civilization.

What lies behind these discussions is the problem of defining "civilization." It is my experience, whenever we have a symposium on civilization, we encounter endless discussion about the definition of civilization. As a pragmatist, I do not think this is productive. Prof. Eisenstadt, of course, has avoided falling into this pitfall. The central concern is, what are we trying to reveal by utilizing "civilization" as a tool.

The use of "civilization" by Prof. Eisenstadt to reveal the uniqueness of Japanese society should also be applied in analyzing the uniqueness of other societies. His attempt resulted in an excessive emphasis on the uniqueness of Japanese civilization. I believe that this is due to the conceptualization of Prof. Eisenstadt, which made the Japanese civilization inevitably unique. To clarify this point, I would like to introduce Umesao Tadao's conceptualization of civilization to contrast with that of Prof. Eisenstadt. Umesao is very influential in the study of civilization in Japan.

The starting point of Umesao was the discovery of the parallel developments of civilizations in Europe and Japan. He used the concept of "civilization" to reveal similarities of Japanese civilization with other civilizations, rather than its uniqueness.

Umesao defined "civilization" as consisting of "institution" and "apparatus." He paid attention to the existence of feudalism in Japan and in Europe to substantiate his theory. This corresponds to Prof. Eisenstadt's notion of "institutional change." That is, both Japan and Europe are very similar in terms of tribal monarchy, feudalism, a relatively centralized absolutism, and in particular, the breakthrough to modernity.

Why were similar systems and institutional changes possible in both Europe and Japan? This is a very interesting issue to which neither Umesao nor Prof. Eisenstadt has given us an answer. In summary, Japanese civilization is not isolated in world civilization as long as we conceptualize civilization in terms of institution and apparatus.

Thus, in the discovery of similarities between Europe and Japan, Umesao's conceptualization of "civilization" becomes significant. However, there was a set back to this conceptualization. That is, it cannot clearly discuss the uniqueness of respective civilizations. Civilization consists of groups of institutions and apparatus. The groups of institutions and apparatus are mutually related and in some cases integrated. The conceptualization of Umesao does not tell us anything about the principle which led these institutions and apparatus to mutually integrate each other.

There ought to be a basic principle together with, or as a backbone of, the institution and apparatus. This principle should provide a stable order to the two. This is the crucial point of division in civilization theories. Umesao might have intentionally excluded this principle which can give order to the institution and apparatus. That is, once we include this principle, it produces an order, and in turn shapes a 'civilization' into a civilization. Then, the history of civilization will give order to the institution and apparatus, thereby producing a self-circulating process, which in turn, guarantees its uniqueness.

This was not convenient for Umesao whose attempt was to reveal the similarities of Europe and Japan. For Prof. Eisenstadt, structural similarity between Japan and Europe is a prerequisite of his argument and his interest focuses on the "patterns of institutional formations" in Japan which is markedly different from the West. In his framework, the relationship between institution and culture is delicate. The "institutional formations" concern not only the institution but also culture. In Prof. Eisenstadt's words, Japan developed "a very distinct continuous pattern of institutional and cultural dynamics."

An institution is under the influence of culture in a sense that it is controlled and defined by the combination of "primordial, sacral, and natural terms." He says, "the major characteristics of this definition have been the strong emphasis on contextual frameworks and the concomitant relative weakness of fully formalized, abstract rules demarcating clearly between the different arenas of action, and defining them in abstract formal terms as separate entities." (Lecture note, p.5)

There is no development of supreme values in Japan. Civilization cannot be maintained without any principles. Japanese civilization thus necessitated a functional equivalent to the supreme values in Axial civilizations. It was "culture" that took this role. Japanese civilization is a culture-centered civilization. It is a supreme principle, which goes beyond culture and forms the framework of Axial civilizations. However, Japan had no alternative but to form the framework of its civilization by basing it on culture. This conclusion reached by Prof. Eisenstadt is most insightful.

Thus, in order to reveal Japanese civilization, we need to reveal Japanese culture. It is clear that Prof. Eisenstadt is not a mere culturalist. He is clear about his position that neither a structuralist position which emphasizes institution and organizational factors, nor a culturalist which considers only cultural patterns of behavior and personality, are sufficient explanations. Both of these approaches are one-sided, and therefore, the integration of both perspectives is necessary. I maintain, however, that in Japan there is nothing but "culture" that forms the framework of civilization, and thus it is culture which controls its institutions.

Prof. Eisenstadt also emphasized that "it is indeed the continual construction and reconstruction of generalized particularistic trust that constitutes the crux of the specified dynamics that developed in Japanese society." (Lecture note, p.20)

What is this "generalized particularistic trust"? First, it is a type of trust. Trust is a norm of human relationships and a form of culture. However, it does not only refer to the norm of human relationships. It can be expanded and generalized in different settings and situations such as family, school, and community. It is a principle of formation at various levels of organizations. However, it is not a universalistic term. A universalistic term only derives from supreme principles. Thus, as a non-Axial civilization, Japan required a fictional principle for its civilization. And this fictional principle is culture, which originated in "generalized particularistic trust."

I believe that Prof. Eisenstadt's Japanese Civilization is a thorough and intentionally Euro-centric work. I am deeply impressed with the fact that someone who grew up in the Western historical experience has pulled the concepts of social sciences together and successfully revealed the characteristics of Japanese civilization. At the same time, as a non-western sociologist, I cannot stop wondering about the existence of a "generalized particularistic trust" in Western societies. Is this Japanese characteristic only found in Japan? Aren't Western societies over-represented by universalistic principles? Someday, we will have to write a comprehensive book entitled, "Western Civilization" from the view point of Japan. That would be the best reply to the intellectual challenges made by Prof. Eisenstadt.